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Patrick Lee

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REASONS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Patrick Lee

The problem addressed is: whether religious belief, defined here as accepting that God has revealed and that what he has revealed is true, could ever be rational. That is, does the idea of religious belief imply that it is irrational? The author attempts to resolve this problem in favor of religious belief, and suggests how reasons can legitimately function in religious belief. The evidentialist objection to religion is answered, and it is proposed that reasons might function, not to prove that God has revealed, or that what he has revealed is true, but that the choice to believe is a morally responsible one.

Perhaps the most central philosophical question regarding religion is, whether any religious belief could ever be rational? The philosophical question is not, whether any religious belief *is* rational, since to answer that question may require more than philosophical inquiry. The question is, does the very idea of religious belief entail that persons having it are doing something irrational or epistemically improper? If this general question is answered negatively, then one need not inquire into any more particular claims on the part of religious belief; religious belief would be, in that case, doomed to failure from the start. On the other hand, arriving at a positive answer would tell us more than *that* religious belief could be rational. It would also tell us something about *how* it might be so. That is, it would begin to show what the structure of the act of religious belief is, and it would suggest to us what role, if any, *reasons* might have in religious belief.

i. *The General Problem*

Let us be more specific about how the problem whether religious belief could be rational arises. Suppose that on a Friday afternoon Professor Jones, a colleague of mine in the philosophy department where I teach, tells me that a student named Smith came by to see me that morning while I was not in. According to Prof. Jones, Smith wanted to tell me that he liked my logic course last semester and wanted to talk with me about philosophy. There is no way for me to verify Jones' story. I cannot have direct knowledge that what he says is true, since I am not perceiving it. Nor can I prove that what he says is true since Smith (let us say) left no effect of his having been there. Hence I do not have indirect knowledge of the fact either. So, it appears that I have a choice. I could believe Jones or not. If I



believe him, then I will be accepting what he says as true (assenting to it), not because I can experience or prove it, but on the basis of Jones' trustworthiness.

This is a somewhat typical act of non-religious belief. Notice that it does not appear to be a blind leap of faith. If I know Jones, and he has the signs or marks of being an honest and level-headed person, then, it seems, my believing him—accepting what he says because he says it—could be a *reasonable* act. It could be a reasonable act, even while, in a sense, it would involve something in addition to reason: it would involve a trust in Jones and a willingness to rely on his word or character for information I could not obtain on my own.

Of course, this also means that an act of belief could be *unreasonable*. If I know, or should know, that Jones is an inveterate liar, or that he regularly hallucinates, or is in some way not trustworthy, then believing him might be irrational. Thus, it seems that whether I should believe Jones or not can be rationally discussed. It makes sense to ask, "Should I believe Jones?" Furthermore, it seems that if I give reasons for why I should believe Jones, or for why it is reasonable to believe him, this is not the same as proving the truth of what he says—for in that case it would no longer be a case of *believing* him.

This sort of act, often called "belief" or "faith," then, would seem to involve: *accepting what someone says, not because there is compelling evidence for it (in the form of experience, understanding or proof), but on the basis of that person's trustworthiness.*¹ Some kinds of faith or belief may involve more than this, but it does not seem they would involve less.²

Philosophers and theologians in the Catholic tradition have often contrasted belief with knowledge on the one hand and opinion on the other. By "knowledge" they meant, roughly: holding a proposition to be true on the basis of evidence which, when considered, *compels* one to accept that proposition to be true. The evidence, of course, could be of various sorts, for example, experience, understanding (as in a self-evident proposition, such as, *A whole is greater than its parts*), or proof. (Of course, there are different interpretations of the various categories of evidence, but that is not of direct concern to my topic here.) By "having an opinion" they meant, being inclined to accept something as true on the basis of evidence, but, the evidence being less than decisive, lacking complete certainty about the matter, i.e., fearing the opposite might be true. (By "certainty" I mean simply the firmness with which one holds that a proposition is true. It seems evident to me that there are varying degrees of such firmness. One uses the word "certainty" without qualification, however, to refer to complete certainty, i.e., adherence to a proposition with no fear that its opposite may be true.)

Thus belief, in the sense in which we are using the term here, is like knowledge in that one has complete certainty; it is unlike knowledge in that the evidence by itself is not compelling—and so there is in belief the element of free choice.

Belief is like opinion in that the evidence is less than compelling but unlike opinion in that in belief one does have complete certainty.³

Religious belief is in many ways analogous to non-religious belief. Christians claim that they believe God himself. Christians claim that God has spoken through the words and deeds of prophets and of his Son, and that these words and deeds are handed down to us by the Church. Religious belief, according to this claim, involves accepting what God has communicated (done and spoken), "not because its intrinsic truth is seen with the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God who reveals it, of God who can neither deceive nor be deceived."⁴ In that sense it is like the example of believing Prof. Jones. However, what God has done and spoken is handed down to us by messengers or mediators. For this reason it is perhaps more like believing Jones but hearing what he has said through a messenger, say, his secretary (or the secretarial pool). In any case, it appears that, just as non-religious belief can be reasonable without being knowledge, similarly, the fact that religious belief is belief does not mean that it cannot be reasonable.

ii. *A Puzzle About Accepting the Fact of Revelation*

However, while religious belief is in many respects similar to non-religious belief, there is a philosophically (and theologically) important disanalogy. In human belief the structure of the act is as follows: I accept a proposition, *p*, on the basis of testimony by a witness. That the witness says *p* is obvious. What someone might doubt, and what seems to require a decision in the case of non-religious belief, is: given that this witness says *p*, is the witness veracious in saying it? That is: a) is this person in a position to know the truth of this proposition, and b) is this person honest in asserting what that person asserts?

But with religious belief the situation is reversed. Hardly anyone doubts that *if* God asserts *p*, then *p* must be true. Few people will say, "Well, God did say that he is triune, but I don't believe it for a moment." What some doubt, and what seems to require a choice to accept, is whether God does in fact assert *p*. Before one accepts *p*, it seems one must first accept that God has asserted *p*—the fact of revelation.

This situation presents a problem. On what basis does one accept the fact of revelation?⁵ On what basis does the believer accept the principal thing which non-believers do not accept? It would seem that one's certainty of the fact of revelation must be based either on knowledge or on belief, for only these seem to give certainty. (I assume here that believers are certain of what they believe.) But supposing either leads to problems.

If one has knowledge of the fact of revelation then, it seems, one's acceptance of the revealed truths is not faith but knowledge. If one has knowledge that, a) God is truthful (or, more modestly, that if God asserts *p* then *p* is true), and b)

God has asserted *p*, then the conclusion that *p* is true is an instance of knowledge, not belief.

On the other hand, if acceptance of the fact of revelation is based *simply* on testimony, whether human or divine, also, there are problems. By belief one normally means: accepting *p* on someone's testimony. But to accept the fact that God is giving testimony on the basis of God's testimony is obviously not rational. If one is asked, "Why do you believe so-and-so," and one replies, "Because so-and-so himself said he is trustworthy," the reply could scarcely be taken seriously.

Moreover, while some people's acceptance with certainty of the fact of revelation (e.g., that of children and simple, uneducated people) can be rationally based on human testimony, this cannot be the case with everyone's acceptance of the fact of revelation. The reason is this. For belief to be rational it must ultimately be traced back to someone's *knowledge* of the matter.⁶ Now, first, it is not at all clear that any human persons have or had *knowledge* that God has in fact given a revelation. Rather, it may be that every human person, prophets and apostles included, must accept the fact of revelation by a type of choice, and not by knowledge. Hence human testimony could not be the ultimate basis, rationally, for one's acceptance of the fact of revelation. Second, the only human beings who could plausibly be said to *know* that God has given a revelation are quite far removed from us in time. Therefore, if human testimony were the basis of one's certainty about the fact of revelation (setting aside the derivative case of children and simple people) then that certainty could not be as firm or strong, reasonably, as religious believers claim that it is or should be.⁷

So, it seems, the certainty with which one accepts the fact of revelation can be based neither on knowledge nor on belief (aside from the derivative belief of children and simple people). But then it is hard to see how one's certainty could be rational at all. At best, it seems, one could have an opinion that revelation is a fact, but one could not be rationally certain of it. However, Christians often assert that divine faith includes "an assent that is firmer than all others."⁸ At the very least, one is encouraged to have great and strong faith.⁹ How could this be so if the situation is as we described it? That is, the very idea of religious belief seems incoherent.

It is true that there is no demonstration by speculative or theoretical reason which gives absolute certainty for the proposition that God has in fact given a revelation.¹⁰ I think the argument against this is conclusive.¹¹

I think it is also true that the certainty of the acceptance of the fact of revelation cannot be based on testimony (although what one accepts in religious faith is precisely that God is speaking through these or those human mediators). Hence acceptance of the fact of revelation is not an instance of exactly the same sort of act as non-religious belief. However, it does not seem that knowledge and

belief, in the senses defined, are the only kinds of acts which reasonably give certainty.

Rather, even outside religious belief there are cognitive acts which are rationally certain and yet neither knowledge nor belief. An example is given by William James in his famous article, "The Will to Believe." Suppose a man is mountain climbing, and has climbed to a dangerous spot from which he can escape only by jumping across a wide chasm. The evidence just on its own indicates that it is probable, but only probable, that he will make the jump (I am changing James's example slightly, for my purposes). But if he believes with certainty he can make it then his chances are greatly increased.¹² It seems to me that it would not be wrong for him to try to induce in himself the belief that he will make the jump. To choose to believe this, or to choose to try to believe it, does not seem irrational. Such an act does not seem to violate one's duty to seek truth and avoid error. (If one's success in jumping were wildly improbable, then it might violate one's moral duty in regard to truth; but on our supposition it is probable that he will succeed).

It might be objected that such examples show, not that one ought sometimes choose to believe, but that one ought sometimes act *as if* one took a given proposition to be certainly true. However, in the example of the man jumping across the chasm, it is precisely his belief that the proposition (that his jump will succeed) is true that enables him to act as he does. In this case, and in others like it,¹³ it is impossible for the person simply to act "as if." He must really believe the proposition as a condition of his acting in the desired manner.

This type of act is not an opinion, since in it one has certainty of the proposition involved. Nor is it a belief, in the sense in which we have used the term here, for one is not accepting the proposition on the basis of someone's testimony. Rather, it is accepting with certainty a proposition for the sake of a good which the belief of that proposition, together with its truth, if it turns out to be true, will help or enable one to realize. Let us call such an act "reasonable conviction."

Hence the argument that the acceptance of the fact of revelation cannot be certain since it cannot be based (ultimately) on knowledge or belief presupposes an incomplete disjunction. Even in non-religious areas there is a type of cognitive act which is rational, certain, and yet neither knowledge nor belief (in the senses we have used the terms here). Acceptance of the fact of revelation is in some respects more analogous to the type of cognitive act we have called "reasonable conviction." In religious belief one accepts the fact of revelation at least partly for the sake of the good(s) which the belief together with its truth will help one realize.

In other words, the famous dilemma regarding one's certainty of the fact of revelation shows only that the word "belief" means different (though related) things when said of religious and non-religious belief. That is, "belief" is said

only analogically of the two kinds of act. This situation should not be surprising, given that religious believers typically claim that religious faith is in many respects *sui generis*.¹⁴

It should also be noted that in most non-religious belief, although it is obvious *that* the witness is testifying to some claim, and so one cannot have the kind of doubt one can have concerning religious belief, nevertheless it is not obvious that the witness is veracious. But the veracity of the witness, one might argue, can be neither known nor accepted on the basis of testimony. So, a puzzle analogous to that raised concerning religious belief could be raised concerning non-religious belief. Whether it be about the witness's veracity or about the fact that he is testifying, in every belief it seems that a decision must be made. Hence if this objection against religious belief were effective, it would prove too much. It would prove all belief, not just religious belief, irrational. In both cases, however, it seems that one can have an adequate reason to accept that which is not fully evident.

iii. *The Evidentialist Objection*

But doesn't the account just given presuppose that it is permissible to allow considerations other than evidence to influence one's act of believing? And isn't this, some object, precisely what irrationality is? Doesn't religious belief involve having more certainty in a proposition than what its evidence warrants? Doesn't it involve going beyond the evidence? This objection to religious belief is sometimes called "rationalism," and of late, the "evidentialist objection to religious belief."

Sometimes evidentialism is expressed in this way: it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.¹⁵ Another way of expressing the position is this: one ought to proportion one's belief in a proposition to the degree of evidence which one has to support that proposition. Or, one ought not *go beyond the evidence* in one's acts of believing.¹⁶

These ways of expressing it come down to the same thing, for what is meant is that, evidence alone should be determinative of what and how one believes. That is, nothing else should affect one's acts of believing except the relationship between the proposition believed and the evidence one knows that supports it. This is why this position is appropriately called "evidentialism."

It seems that religious belief, or at any rate, Christian belief, violates the norm proposed by the evidentialist position. Hence if evidentialism were right, then one could know, *a priori*, that religious belief, or at any rate Christian belief, is objectively irrational; i.e., one could know this prior to examination of any particular claims made by Christianity. For either the evidence is sufficient or it is not. If it is sufficient then Christian belief is incoherent since it calls "belief"

or “faith” what is actually knowledge. If the evidence is not sufficient then it is incoherent, since it asks one to accept something with more certainty than it is reasonable for one to do. So if evidentialism were true one would know that the very idea of Christian belief is incoherent.

Anthony Kenny succinctly states the evidentialist objection, as applied to Christianity, as follows:

No doubt it may be reasonably believed that Moses and Jesus did and said many of the things ascribed to them in the Bible; but can it reasonably be believed with a degree of certainty resembling that of knowledge? Unless the relevant stories can be as certain as the commitment which faith demands of the believer, the commitment is, so far forth as it is faith, irrational; and if the belief is a commitment which is rationally in proportion to the support given by the history, it is, so far forth as it is rational, something less than faith.¹⁷

Certainly, religious belief by Christians violates the norm proposed by evidentialism. In Christian belief one is absolutely certain of propositions alleged to be revealed, but, since it is belief and not knowledge, one has less than demonstrative evidence for the proposition. Nevertheless, what is the evidence for evidentialism? Why make evidence alone determinative of the degree with which one will assent to a proposition? Why can't a hope for the realization of a basic good (together with a degree of evidence) justify a choice to believe, provided that in such a choice truth is not negated or disregarded?

Of course, what is really behind the evidentialist position is the conviction that going beyond the evidence, letting something besides evidence influence one's acts of believing, constitutes in itself a negation or a disregarding of truth. But what reason, what evidence is there, for such a position?¹⁸

I have described the act of “reasonable conviction” as an act of accepting a proposition for the sake of a good which the belief, *together with the truth of the proposition*, will help one realize. If the belief alone were sufficient to bring about the good one is seeking by believing, then it seems that the action would involve disregarding truth, and therefore would be immoral.¹⁹ An example of this is: believing in astrology because it makes one feel good, or even, believing in God solely because such a belief makes one more moral. If the belief by itself—independently of the belief's truth—were sufficient to bring about the good one hoped for, then one's choice to believe would include a willingness or consent to believe falsely. This would violate the basic good of possession of truth.

However, what we have called reasonable conviction does not include a consent to believe falsely. And, since religious belief either is a type of reasonable conviction or is analogous (in the relevant respects) to it, it does not include a

consent to believe falsely either. In sum: (1) religious belief can be motivated by a hope for the realization of a basic human good; (2) religious belief need not include a negative attitude toward or a disregarding of any other basic human good. From these points it follows that religious belief could be, in the appropriate conditions, a morally good act. More formally:

Every immoral act violates (i.e., negates, disregards, or so on) a basic human good.

Possibly, some acts of religious belief do not violate a basic human good.

Therefore, possibly, some acts of religious belief are not immoral.

The ethics of belief is in some respects analogous to the ethics of sex, though of course there are also important differences. One might argue that the sexual power is naturally oriented to the procreative good, while the cognitive power is naturally oriented to the possession of truth. But just as it does not follow that the sexual power must be used *only for* procreation (no one argues this) so also it does not follow that one's cognitive acts, one's acts of believing, must be influenced only by the goal of truth. What follows is that all of the basic goods that could be affected by the action carrying out one's choice must be respected. Just as one ought not to negate the procreative good, so one ought not to negate the good of possession of truth.

But just as the choice to engage in sex for the sake of expressing marital communion is morally good if it is a choice that does not disregard the procreative good; so the choice to believe for the sake of a basic good which the belief, together with the truth of the belief, will help one realize, can in some instances be morally good, i.e., in those instances where truth is not disregarded. In neither case is there a choice to impede or destroy a basic good; in neither case need one disregard a basic good. The two cases are similar in the relevant respects. Hence if it can be morally permissible to engage in sex for a good other than procreation, then it can also be morally permissible for one's act of believing to be influenced (in this case, be more certain) by a hope for the good of personal communion.²⁰

Moreover, it seems that friendship, any friendship, is a good that can be realized *only by* going beyond the evidence. One does not have to be a dualist to see that crucial aspects of the person, such as a person's commitments, are not directly seen or experienced by other persons. And yet it is especially with these aspects of the person that one unites oneself in a friendship. In a friendship each friend not only cares for the other for the other's sake, but also in some way chooses, freely accepts, the friendship, i.e., the relationship, itself. This could not be so unless each friend accepted the other's (explicit or implicit) claim to be a friend, the other's claim to care for that friend. But this caring, this resolve to be a friend, is an aspect of the other person that cannot be directly

seen or experienced. In other words, reaching out to central aspects of another self, in friendship, requires one to go beyond the evidence, for the simple reason that central aspects of the self *are* beyond the evidence. One must be willing to accept, without proof, that the other is sincere in his or her offer or claim of friendship.

If this is true, then belief is not a necessary means toward friendship, but a part of it. Friendship is impossible without belief, without accepting something upon insufficient evidence, without an assent not proportioned to the evidence. Now, friendship is a morally good thing. Therefore belief, going beyond the evidence, which is part of it, must also be morally permissible. Or, to state the argument differently, if the evidentialist objection against religious belief were effective, it would also show that friendship is immoral, which, I think, we can take to be a *reductio ad absurdum*.

To sum up this section. Granted, the evidence is not sufficient to warrant the degree of certainty characteristic of religious belief; on this point Kenny and others are correct. But they assume that only evidence can rationally justify certainty. And what I have argued is that concern for a good which the belief plus the belief's truth would help one realize can supplement evidence in order to rationally justify certainty.

iv. *The Good Which Motivates the Choice of Religious Belief and the Appropriateness of Certainty*

It remains to illustrate what good might rationally motivate the choice of religious belief. For comparison let us look at another instance of non-religious belief, one more closely analogous to religious belief than the examples we have examined so far. Suppose George proposes marriage to Hilda. He tells Hilda that he loves her, proposes that they set up together a common life, and tells her of things he has done for her—that he has, for example, bought them a house for the home they will make if she says yes. So, Hilda has a choice. She can accept what George says as true and sincere and accept the proposal, or not. She cannot, obviously, *prove* that his proposal is sincere. Let us suppose George is not a villainous type, that there are signs that he is a good and honest person; in other words, one would likely say his claim is “credible,” worthy to be believed.

Well, might there not be a good reason for Hilda to choose to believe and accept George's proposal? And, doesn't it seem that if she accepts the proposal there is good reason for accepting it with certainty? Accepting it with certainty, without doubts, seems to be part of the commitment one must make in order to enter into such a personal relationship. If she held that the proposal were *probably* sincere, that accepting it is merely a good *bet*, her attitude would seem more appropriate to a business transaction, that is, to a merely contractual union. It

would not be appropriate to the kind of personal communion which should flourish in a marriage. So, because it is a personal relationship that is involved, if Hilda accepts, then it seems reasonable to say that she ought to accept with certainty. Hilda's choice to accept the proposal would be for the sake of the personal communion offered in the proposal. And because the acceptance begins a personal communion, certainty is appropriate.

This type of situation is analogous with religious belief in many respects. Christians claim that God proposes to set up a common life with those who accept his proposal. Hence according to Christians revelation is not merely impersonal information or a set of speculative truths. It is a personal communication. It reveals, in part, who God is, his invitation and commitment to personal communion, and many of the things he has done for us.²¹

So, as with the marriage situation, it seems that one might reasonably choose to accept God's proposal for the sake of the personal communion offered. Moreover, as with the marriage situation, if one accepts the proposal there seems to be a good reason to accept it with certainty.

v. *How Reasons Might Function In Religious Belief*

But if all this is true then what need is there for reasons at all? Do people need reasons for their religious belief to be rational? Are there not many quite rational beliefs in the absence of reasons? Moreover, what role, precisely, could reasons play in the act of belief, if they are needed? Would not basing one's belief on reasons make it unstable, just the opposite of what believers want to say religious belief ought to be?²²

It is important to distinguish the following questions: (a) Does *everyone* need evidence, i.e., arguments, to support their conviction that God has given a revelation? (b) Do *some people* need arguments to support their religious belief?

To answer (a) would require us to settle some large issues in the theory of knowledge.²³ But for most practical issues, as far as I can see, there is no need to answer this question. So, whether *every* religious believer needs reasons or not, we shall not investigate. It does seem, however, that *some* people need reasons or arguments if their religious belief is to be rational. Specifically, people who stop and ask themselves whether they should accept religious belief, or this or that religious belief, need reasons if their belief is to be rational.

If one explicitly asks oneself whether one should believe, or whether one's belief is a good thing, then, in order to be rational, one must consider the circumstances or conditions that might make that belief rational. And the consideration of such justifying circumstances or conditions is reasoning. The reason why one must, in that situation, consider the justifying conditions of the belief is this: when one asks which of two (or more) alternatives one ought to do, both

of which seem to be at least indirectly within one's power, then, for the choice to be morally good, one must be sure that one is not slighting or disregarding any of the goods affected by one's choice. Now, possession of truth is one of the goods affected by one's choice to believe. And so when one chooses to believe something one must consider conditions or circumstances which pertain to the likelihood of one's belief being true.

Someone might object that while this argument may prove that some people must *reason*, it does not show that they must *have reasons*. Considering alternatives is not the same as having reasons for one alternative over the other. As the argument stands this objection would be correct, or, put otherwise, in the abstract the argument of the last paragraph shows only that some people must reason not that they must arrive at reasons. However, concretely, the religion I am interested in is Christianity, which is an historical and quite reasonable religion. So, if one does reason about Christianity, I presume one will *have* reasons also.

Hence the function reasons serve is, not to prove the theoretical proposition stating the fact that God has revealed, but (at least) to make it clear to oneself that one's choice to believe is a morally responsible choice.²⁴

However, it is at least misleading to say that one's belief is *based* on the reasons one has in its favor. Acceptance of revelation is not simply the conclusion of an argument. That is, to say that the belief was based on arguments would imply the arguments were the sole foundation, a sufficient condition accounting for one's belief and the manner in which one holds it. These implications are simply not true, as we have seen above, and so in the normal sense of the word, "basis," the arguments are not the basis of the belief.²⁵ Rather, they are conditions for the moral goodness of one's choice to believe.

The fact that reasons have such a role does not make one's belief unstable and subject to doubt. It would do so only if one followed the evidentialist prescription and proportioned one's belief to those reasons, i.e., to the evidence (and so, to see how one should believe today one would have to tally the evidence at hand today). But we have already rejected the evidentialist prescription.

When speaking of the role of reasons in belief we should note that people often reason without being able to articulate their reasoning processes. This happens especially regarding personal or complex topics. For example, one may recognize a friend, and have gone through a reasoning process to recognize him, and yet be unable to articulate the reasoning one did. Similarly, a person may in fact perceive or be aware that the Gospel and the Church have various signs of divine origin, but be unable to articulate the arguments one goes through, implicitly, to reach one's certainty that God is speaking through them.²⁶ This is another reason why evidentialism is not a reasonable norm by which to regulate one's acts of belief. Very often one has more evidence than one can articulate

or tally. Hence in practice it is often impossible to know how to proportion one's belief to the evidence one actually possesses.

How reasons might enter into religious belief, may be further illustrated if we consider another example. Suppose that a young man has just been in a serious motorcycle accident and almost killed. He is lying in the hospital bed with his head bandaged so that he can only see dimly and hear vaguely. Suppose also that the hospital authorities have informed him that his treatment will be discontinued unless he proves himself able to pay the bill, and he cannot do that. Further, the boy was estranged from his family a few years back; he left home, say, after a heated argument with his parents. While he is lying in the hospital bed a man comes into his room, claims to be his brother, and claims to have a message from their father, that the father is in town and would like to visit the boy and receive the boy back into the family.

Since the boy cannot see or hear well, it is not immediately evident that the person speaking to him really is who he says he is. Maybe, it occurs to him, the man is really a doctor trying to make him feel good before he dies. So, it seems that the boy has a choice; he can believe the claim or not.

How could the boy go about making up his mind whether to accept the claim? Perhaps he would listen to the alleged brother very carefully. Perhaps he would investigate both the alleged brother and what he says, to determine as well as he could whether he acts like his brother would act, whether he does and says just the kinds of things his brother would say and do. Similarly, people looking into the Christian claim should look at Jesus, his deeds, and his teaching to see whether Jesus does indeed act like a messenger from God, and whether he does and says the things that only a messenger of God would and could do.

The boy might scrutinize the alleged brother's message to see if it is the sort of message his father would give, whether, perhaps, it reveals things only his father would know, whether, that is, it has the marks or signs of really being a message from his father. Likewise, people can investigate Christian teaching and ask whether it has signs of having a divine origin.

In replying to evidentialism, I have argued above that the idea of religious belief is not incoherent. That is, I tried to show that it would be reasonable to accept a belief with more certainty than the evidence by itself warrants. Such a choice could be reasonable, I argued, provided there is some degree of evidence and provided that one chooses to be certain, or to believe, for the sake of the truth and the personal communion offered, which are basic goods one can begin to realize by believing, if the belief is true. This example of the boy in the hospital, however, suggests that there can be situations where, while the evidence is not sufficient to compel one to give assent, nevertheless, the evidence, together with the whole situation, are such that one morally *ought* to accept a particular belief.

To see this, consider the following. Suppose that in the boy's case the evidence is not sufficient to compel the boy's assent. He cannot, in other words, have *knowledge* (in the sense in which we have used the word here) that this is his brother and that this is a message from his father. But at some point it seems there could be enough evidence so that the boy *ought* to accept the claim. The boy ought not to demand absolute proof before he accepts the claim made by the (alleged) brother. Were he to do so, this would indicate an ungracious or impious attitude toward his father, and an unwise disregard for his own health.

Similarly, at some point the evidence for the Christian claim might be sufficient, not to compel assent, but to make it such that one not only may, but morally *ought*, to accept the proposal as true. Just as in the boy's situation, so here, to demand absolute proof, to demand proof that would be proportionate to the assent asked of one, would be to lack the virtues of gratitude and piety (as well as a prudent regard for one's ultimate welfare). And so reasons might function, not to show with absolute certainty the theoretical proposition that the claim is a fact, but to show the *moral* proposition that I ought to believe. There are many situations in which one ought to believe: a child ought to believe his or her parents, a scientist ought to believe most of his colleagues when they report experimental findings, a wife (generally) ought to believe her husband. The situations where reasons might function in this way are, roughly, those in which to demand absolute proof, or even to demand more evidence than one possesses, as a pre-requisite to believing, would show a disregard for the basic goods one might realize by the belief together with the truth of the belief.

Christians claim that they bear or transmit a personal communication from God, that is, a proposal from him of personal communion and an invitation to participate in building up a community of divine and human persons (called "the Kingdom"). In several respects, then, we are in a situation analogous to that of the boy in the hospital.²⁷ Whether the reasons in behalf of Christianity *are* sufficient to show that one ought to believe is a question that would require looking into historical and other types of evidence outside the philosophical realm to answer. But I have tried to show here that the idea that such might be the case is not incoherent in itself.²⁸

Center for Thomistic Studies, University of St. Thomas

NOTES

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part II-II, Question 1, article 4. A contemporary exposition that contrasts knowledge and belief as I have done: Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Insight*, A

Study of Human Understanding, 3rd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), pp. 703-13.

2. Specifically, belief which is at the basis of an interpersonal relationship includes more than what is indicated so far. This is true of religious belief also, since it is the basis of the personal relationship between the believer and God. When a woman accepts a marriage proposal, she does more than accept certain propositions as true. She accepts the person making the proposal, for what he proposes is a common life; and she commits herself to do her part in the new relationship she is entering. Religious belief is analogous to acceptance of a marriage proposal, since revelation is God's proposal to set up a common life with us, and so it also includes more than accepting the truth of certain propositions. However, while it includes more, nevertheless, accepting propositions as true is essentially involved in it. It would be nonsense if a woman claimed to believe her husband but not to believe him when he says he loves her and that he has done certain things for her. Likewise, it is incorrect to say one can believe God without accepting the truth of any propositions.

3. St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. II-II, q. 2, a. 1.

4. First Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Church*, in Denzinger-Schoenmetzer, #3008. An English translation can be found in: *The Church Teaches, Documents of the Church in English Translation*, ed. Jesuit Fathers of St. Mary's College, St. Mary's, Kansas (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1973), p. 29.

5. This is a classic problem, discussed in the classical scholastic theology manuals under the title, "The Analysis of the Act of Faith." E.g., see J. M. Hervé, *Manuale Theologiae Dogmaticae, Vol. III, De Gratia Christi—De Virtutibus Theologicis, De Sacramentis in genere, Baptismo et Confirmatione* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1946), pp. 348-54. A very thorough treatment, including a history of treatments of the problem: Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Revelatione Per Ecclesiam Catholicam Proposita*, Vol. I, 4th ed. (Rome: F. Ferrari, 1945), pp. 427-514.

6. This is why the belief of children and simple, uneducated people, which is based on the belief of their parents, priest, minister, rabbi, or so on, is derivative in a special sense. It is derivative not just in the sense that it relies on someone else's knowledge but in that it relies on the *belief* of other people. This is not in any way to detract from the virtuousness of such faith. It is simply to say that if such belief is to be objectively rational, it must derive from someone else's rational belief.

7. Why, someone may object, do the prophets in the Old Testament repeat such things as, "This is the very word of the Lord," or, "Thus says the Lord"? (For example, see Jeremiah, ch. 7; Ezekiel, ch. 7) First, someone must say, or it must somehow be indicated, when it is that the prophet begins to speak not in his own name but in God's. That is, *whether* God is speaking through this person is a distinct question from *when* he begins to speak. And I am inclined to think that such utterances as just mentioned address the second question rather than the first.

But, secondly, I do not wish to say that the acceptance of the fact of revelation is in no way or degree based on human testimony. There is a sense in which the believer believes both God and the prophet. But my point in the text is that this dependence on human testimony is either not ultimate or, at least, fails to account for the certainty involved in the believer's acceptance of the fact of revelation.

8. E.g., St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. II-II, q. 4, a. 8, especially replies to objections 2 and 3. Cf. Hervé, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

9. E.g., St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, 3: 10; Romans, 14; 2 Corinthians, 10: 15.

10. By speculative or theoretical reasoning is meant reasoning about what is the case, which concludes to a proposition stating what is the case. Moral reasoning, on the other hand, is about what ought to be done, and it concludes to a proposition stating what one ought to do.

11. This point is also argued by Alvin Plantinga in "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, ed., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983), p. 16 f..

12. William James, "The Will to Believe," reprinted in William Rowe and William Wainwright, ed., *Philosophy of Religion, Selected Readings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), p. 354 f..

13. A similar case is that of a man who is asked to trust his wife. In that situation, and over a period of time, it would be impossible for him to hide his disbelief from his wife. Hence his actually believing her, and not just his acting as if he does, is what contributes to the human good involved, viz., their personal communion. For a discussion of this case, see J. S. Clegg, "Faith," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), 225-32.

14. This is not to say I reject the classical definition of faith or religious belief as an assent based on testimony. Rather, if one insists on treating the acceptance of the fact of revelation separately, and so in that case it would not be based on testimony, then it still does not follow that faith is irrational. What would follow is only that it is of a different sort of act than of the sort one is willing to call "belief."

15. "But if the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our body and spread to the rest of the town."

And: "To sum up: It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," reprinted in: E. D. Klemke, A. David Kline, Robert Hollinger, ed., *Philosophy, The Basic Issues* (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), p. 49, 50.

Cf. Bertrand Russell, "Why I am not a Christian," in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), p. 3 ff. Anthony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1976), p. 22 ff. Cited by Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

16. "There is such a thing as a general ethics of the intellect. The main principle of that ethic I hold to be the same inside and outside religion. This principle is simple and sweeping: Equate your assent to the evidence." Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), p. 401. Cf. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. IV, ch. XVI.

17. Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University, 1983), p. 83.

18. Both evidentialism and our account presuppose that one does, in some way, have voluntary control over some of one's beliefs. Some object that we do not have such control, that it makes no sense to speak of choosing to believe, that belief, rather, is something that happens to one in the face of evidence.

It is true that there are many things we could not choose to believe. For example, most of us could not choose to believe that the moon is made of green cheese even if we tried. On the other hand, by experience there seem to be propositions for which there is a great deal of evidence, but are such that some of us would say the evidence was enough to be convincing while others would say more was needed. It seems that in such situations we do have a choice, a choice whether to let the amount of evidence actually possessed be enough or not.

Speaking about what we do, and not yet about what we *ought* to do—for the objection concerns what it is possible for us to do—it seems that in the face of even a slight amount of evidence or

any testimony at all, it is our doubt that requires an additional motive or consideration. That is, it seems that our mind's tendency is spontaneously to assert what we have evidence for, however slight that evidence be. If we wish to doubt, we must make an effort to check that propensity. Perhaps, then, "choosing to believe" is a phrase that is slightly misleading. For we do not simply choose to believe some proposition in the absence of any other conditions influencing us to believe. But our experience does indicate that we do find ourselves in situations where we can choose that the evidence actually possessed have its way, so to speak. That is, there are situations where we can choose to believe in the sense of choosing to refrain from further doubts.

19. For a defense and development—philosophical, even though in the context of a theology work—of some of the ethical points presupposed here: Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Volume I, Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), Chapters 5, 7 and 8. Also see: Germain Grisez and Joseph M. Boyle, *Life and Death with Liberty and Justice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979), pp. 358-71.

20. In the case of belief it seems that a regard for truth requires also that there be some degree of evidence, that the proposition not be wildly improbable.

21. See Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, *op. cit.*, Chapter 20.

22. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," *op. cit.*

23. Plantinga, *op. cit.*, argues that the position that *everyone* needs reasons or arguments for his or her belief to be rational rests on classical foundationalism. Classical foundationalism is the claim that unless a belief is self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, one must have evidence for it for one's acceptance of it to be rational. He then argues that this claim does not pass its own test, that it is self-referentially inconsistent.

To settle this issue, then, would require delving into the deep waters of the controversy surrounding epistemological foundationalism, and its various sub-species.

24. This position was argued by Guy De Broglie, S.J., *Revelation and Reason*, trans. by Mark Pontifex, O.S.B. (New York: Hawthorn, 1965), pp. 1-66.

25. This claim is not new. It was universally agreed to by the classical scholastic theologians who discussed the problem concerning the analysis of the act of faith.

26. Cf. John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday, Image, 1955), especially pp. 270-300, in the chapter on what Newman called "the illative sense."

27. I have not examined here the role of divine grace. As a Christian I believe that "No one can come to [Jesus] unless it is granted him by the Father." (John, 6, 66). How grace and nature interact in the act of belief is another question. But I suppose here that this act is a human act, even though it is transformed by grace, and my chief concern in this article has been to show that, and to a certain extent, how, this act need not violate any human values.

28. I am grateful to Joseph M. Boyle and William P. Alston, the editor, for critical comments on earlier versions of this article.